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ABSTRACT

Most of what the world envisions of the period of westward expansion in America has been crafted through Hollywood cinema. The myths of the West are so ingrained in America's culture that they have taken on a truth all their own. In a series of recent films, which began with the release of "Boyz N the Hood," Hollywood is at it again, presenting what it calls a "realistic" view of life in America's black ghettos. In Hollywood's creation of "the hood," black youth are prone to acts of heinous violence. Black males seem unaware of the cycle of violence they create, and violence against other than black males is not only accepted, it is encouraged. How can violence against black males be stopped when they are constantly portrayed as instigators and perpetrators of their own condition? The films of "the hood" construct the black male as being synonymous with violence. The longer this trend continues, the greater the danger of it becoming an internalized part of culture. The "reality" Hollywood is creating must be questioned. Hollywood cannot be allowed to hide behind black film makers and terms like "gritty" and "realistic" to market this product. The notion that the "Hood" films reflect reality is the most troubling convention of the genre. (Contains 41 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Black on Black Crime: Hollywood's Construction of the Hood

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Most of what the world envisions of the period of westward expansion in America has been crafted through Hollywood Cinema. The myths of the west are so ingrained in America's culture that they have taken on a truth all their own. In a series of recent films, which began with the release of Boyz in the Hood, Hollywood is at it again presenting what it calls a "realistic" view of life in America's black ghettoes. In Hollywood's creation of"the hood" black youth are prone to acts of heinous violence. Black males seem unaware of the cycle of violence they create, violence against other black males is not only accepted, it is encouraged. How can violence against black males be stopped when they are constantly portrayed as the instigator and perpetrator of their own condition? The films of "The Hood" construct the black male as being synonymous with violence. The longer this trend continues, the greater the danger of it becoming an internalized part of culture. The "reality" Hollywood is creating must be questioned. Hollywood cannot be allowed to hide behind black film makers and terms like "gritty" and "realistic"to market this product.

Bell Hooks writes "Unless you went to work in the White world, across the tracks, you learned to look at White people by staring at them on the screen" (p.290). Because of film's ability to approximate the visual and audio information which is found in face to face interaction, the information contained within the film can not go unquestioned (Gergen & Gergen 1981). Turner (1993) writes, "Film does not reflect or even record reality; like any other medium of representation it constructs and 'represents' its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths, and ideologies of the culture as well as by way of the specific signifying practices of the medium" (p.131). In film, what one gets is not reality, but a version of reality that they are willing to accept. When film does not challenge the dominant constructions an individual has of the world, it can become part of evidence used to further solidify those constructions. Given the impact of film on shaping an individual's view of "reality", questions are often raised with regards to the manner in which certain segments of America's culture are depicted in film.

Numerous studies have been conducted in an effort to garner greater understanding regarding the relationship the news media has in the reinforcement and maintenance of racial stereotypes (Carey, 1988; Tuchman, 1978; Martindale, 1996). Entman, 1990, 1992; West, 1993; and Simmons (1993) have all focused much of their studies on the negative images of the black male. Reeves and Campbell (1994) contend a strong relationship existed between drug coverage and race during the cocaine crisis in the 1980's. They argue the news media played an important role in the establishing and maintaining of a "new racism". "New racism" allows racist views to be maintained and supported under the guise of discussions about issues like,

welfare, drugs and crime. Quantitative analysis clearly reflects the disproportionately large amount of negative news coverage focused on black communities. A study conducted on Boston area newspapers indicated 85% of the stories about two predominately black neighborhoods presented blacks in a negative light, portraying them primarily as drug addicts, thieves, and perpetrators or victims of violence (Johnson, 1987).

Recently, Hollywood has produced a number of films focusing on the lives of black men living in the inner cities. Among these films are Do The Right Thing (1989), *Boyz N The Hood* (1992), and Menace II Society (1993). These films, along with a number of others, have been instrumental in creating and solidifying a new film genre, the "hood" film. Set in America's urban ghettoes, the "hood" film claims to tell the "real" stories of the young black males living there. The filmic reality created in the "hood" film, and the impact it has on America's view of the black male is of paramount importance. The "reality" being created in the "hood" film is becoming hard to question and difficult to change, reminiscent of another uniquely American film genre, the Western.

The Western remains one of America's most recognized film genres. Jeanine Basinger (1994) writes, "No genre is more typically American than the Western. No storytelling format more indigenous to Hollywood. It is our West -- an awesome landscape, a dramatic history, and a colorful cast of real-life characters who settled"(p.13). The Western told the stories of individuals going forth into wilderness, and through their own hard work and perseverance, the wilderness was tamed. The classic narrative of good versus evil became the center of most Western plots, with good guys usually represented in the white hats and the bad guys in the

black hats. Westerns reduced many of the issues facing America as it expanded west to this binary of good versus evil. This binary structure was crucial to establishing an image of simplicity on the open range. As America wrestled with difficult issues related to industrialization and immigration, the Western became a romantic reminder of a less complicated time.

The Western and American Genre

The Western established a moral universe, with codes reflective of those, viewers should embrace if they wanted to be identified as true Americans.

> "Along with the rituals and the familiar characters, the Western film forged its own set of attitudes. At least until the sixties, when revisionist views in an age of dissent and skepticism began to change the character of the genre, the traditional Western had offered certain truisms, repeated over time by Western filmmakers to the point that their audiences came to expect them. Strength and resilience resided in the family unit . . . duty in defense of one's land was an almost mystical experience, and protecting it deserved the most that anyone could give . . . duty in defense of one's land and country remained a sacred obligation, and honor dictated that such duty never be shirked. These beliefs and attributes had long been considered proudly American, and, injected into the Western film, they formed a dream of America as

it sees itself and as it wanted to be seen by the world."(Garfield, 1992, p.8)

Garfield also notes how Western heroes usually said very little because they had right and morality on their side. Typically, the Western hero was a loner, living a peaceful life outside of the settled community. Although the hero craved peace, he was willing to resort to violence when pushed by circumstances. When violence was used, it functioned under a strict moral code, only used when necessary in defense of life, property, and honor. Viewers learned to tell the good guys from the bad guys by how well the characters adhered to this code. Acts of violence were not to take place in the presence of women and children, which allowed for the clearing of the innocent from the street before the gunfight, to become a recurring motif in the genre. A stringent code of honor prevailed over the gunfight itself; there was honor to be found in meeting your enemies face to face, whether it be with fist or sidearm. There was no greater disgrace than to shoot a man in the back. Shane, released in 1953, is refereed to by many film critics as the epitome of the Hollywood Western. Shane, the film's hero, rides into town, wanting nothing more than to live a peaceful life as a rancher. Inevitably, circumstances arise and he is forced to strap on his gun in order to defend the innocent. Once law and order is restored, Shane rides off into the sunset, alone. The character of Shane exemplifies the myth of the west. Even though greatly out numbered, he is able to vanquish the villains because he has right and morality on his side.

The pursuit of America's manifest destiny was a familiar plot for the Western. Historically, America's pursuit of its manifest destiny was full of political and moral

complexities. The Western however, reduced it to the simple question of good versus evil. The good being the pursuit of the manifest destiny, and the evil being anything interfering with the quest. Historians find themselves working against mythology so ingrained through these codes and conventions, that challenges and displacement of the myths generate little response of interest. Westerns, such as; Little Big Man (1970), A Man Called Horse (1970), and Dances with Wolves (1990), have all tried to tell a some what different version of the manifest destiny. However, they are merely three films speaking against the images of hundreds of others. Garfield notes "The Western is an American folklore: a mythology, depending on fantasy rather than history. There never was a quick-draw show down in the real West, and most of the other familiar trappings of the genre are equally fictitious"(p.13). The Western is in essence folklore which has become history.

The question is one of "so what?" So what if Hollywood tells its own history of America's westward expansion? These films never claimed to be anything more than entertainment for the masses. No claims to authenticity were made, if the world wanted to take them as fact, it is not the fault of those who made them.

Seldom does the Hollywood Western take responsibility for any of the images distributed, conveniently hiding behind claims of freedom of speech and creative license, a privilege the film industry consistently invokes. In the meantime, misunderstandings mount, as groups outside of mainstream Hollywood question the stories and visual images used to represent their lives. Perhaps no group of people was more maligned through Hollywood's camera lenses and projected reels of "entertainment" than the Native American. The Native

American's dominant film image is one of a savage destroying property, willing to kill innocent woman and children, all without remorse. Rarely are they shown as peaceful people being driven from land that is rightfully theirs. Their attacks on settlers were in defense of their property. According to the moral coding of the Western, violence was acceptable in defense of one's property. However, the Native American is not allowed the same rights as the white man in the moral universe created in the Western. Native Americans are not the only minority to suffer at the hands of the Hollywood Western. Chinese immigrants, who historically were instrumental in the building of American railroad systems and settling California, appear only sporadically in the Western. In film, their contribution to westward expansion is usually connected with the establishment of opium dens and cleaning the white man's laundry. The Mexican was depicted as the bandito with a big sombrero and bushy mustache, always sneaking across our border, committing crimes in order to get enough pesos to keep him supplied with tequila and senoritas. The minority fairing the best treatment in the Western was the African-American, only because he was generally excluded. History declares the African-American did have an active part in the westward expansion, yet there are very few images of the African-American in the Hollywood Western. Through filmic reality their presence, at least in the world of these films, was erased.

The Western, as a genre, built its conventions over a period of years to where they became easily recognized and standardized. Westerns are evaluated and criticized based on how well they adhered to the conventions. Before scholars began to critically evaluate the images the Western was producing, the images had already seized a place in America's culture. Today,

film's current depiction of African-American life in the inner city has a great deal in common with the Western. Films like New Jack City, Boyz N The Hood, Menace II Society, Juice, Fresh, and Jason's Lyric are informing viewers about African-Americans living in the inner city. Unlike the Western, which took years to be critically evaluated, these "hood" films are garnering attention right away, mostly due to the violent nature of their content. The images Americans are internalizing from films of the "hood" are of grave concern. What is life like in the inner city according to Hollywood, and is Hollywood creating a recognized standard for evaluating the reality of inner city life?

Do the Right Thing--A new genre begins

In 1989, Lee's Do the Right Thing caught the attention of those counting the box office receipts in Hollywood. Over the years, Lee had made a number of films appealing to black audiences, but Do the Right Thing was a film with cross over appeal, drawing both blacks and whites to the theater. Even though Do the Right Thing does not fit neatly into the "hood" film genre, it is important because it introduced many of the themes, conventions, and motifs that typify the genre to a mainstream audience. Set on the hottest day of the year in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant, the screenplay centers on questions of racism debated in and around Sal's Famous Pizzeria. Bed-Stuy, as it is commonly known in the world of the film and in actuality, is a community in transition. The area, once heavily populated by Italian immigrants, is now primarily African-American and Hispanic. Sal's, the film's fictional setting, is one of the only Italian businesses left in the community. While the characters debate issues of race, a young black man is killed by the police and Sal's Famous Pizzeria is destroyed in the ensuing riot.

The riot reflects one of the recurring themes in "hood" films, that being: black males are subject to explode into great states of rage and violence at a moment's notice. Sal's is destroyed as those in the community lash out against the police for killing a young black man, Radio Raheem. Lee's character, Mookie, is the first to attack Sal's, even though Sal is his employer and has been doing business in the community for a number of years. Mookie, in his moment of uncontrollable rage, pitches a trash can through Sal's window, the action initiating the destruction of the business. A trash can was Mookie's weapon of choice to express his rage, but in subsequent "hood" films the weapons of choice have become deadlier and the consequences of the outcome much more serious. The black males in succeeding "hood" films commit acts of violence over the most minor and insignificant actions. In these films, a cross look, or saying the wrong word can lead to death, as seen in the 1993 release, Poetic Justice. In the film, one young black male kills another because some days earlier he was "talkin shit". The scene is graphic and the violence senseless.

Do The Right Things makes it unclear as to where the world of fact ends and the world of fiction begins. There is a moment in the film where Mookie and his sister, Jade, are walking in front of a building. Written on the wall of the building is the statement "Tawana told the truth". The message is a clear reference to the racially changed situation of Tawana Brawley which occurred in 1988. Tawana was a teenager who disappeared from her home. After four days she was found, in a dumpster half clothed and covered in dog excrement, with the words KKK and nigger written on her chest. She told the authorities she had been kidnapped and raped by six white men, one of whom had a police badge. The incident galvanized the black community, the

point where a $25,000 reward was offered for the perpetrators of the crime and a $100,000 scholarship was established in her behalf. After a grand jury investigation, it was concluded that Tawana had fabricated the whole story. There were many who felt as if the police had sabotaged the investigation in order to protect one of their own. However, there was little evidence to support that position. The inclusion of the graffiti serves as a racial hot button and gives this fictional story a strong connection to fact.

One of Do the Right Thing's most interesting moments occurs during a visual confrontation between two white police officers and three black men on a street corner. Three prominent "hood" motifs can be identified within this visual interchange. The first being, police are inherently racist towards black people. Lee uses slow motion as the police officers offer commentary on blacks being lazy, while a point of view shot reveals black men sitting around on a street corner. The slow motion commentary is an attempt to highlight the police officers' racism. On one level, the viewer sees that the officers are racist through their observations, but the moment also functions on another level, actually validating negative visual images of black males. Lee seems to be unaware of the implied meaning being projected of these men sitting out on a street corner, drinking beer in the middle of the day. The synonymous relationship of the black male to alcohol consumption is the second motif represented in the sequence. Lee reinforces this relationship throughout the film by returning to the men on the street corner, drinking and insulting each other. Da Mayor, on the film major characters, rarely appears without a beer in hand. Rampant unemployment among black males is the third motif the sequence calls attention to, as in subsequent "hood" films, black males are seldom shown in a

work environment. In Do The Right Thing there are numerous depiction's of black males, yet only two appear to have jobs, Mookie and the DeeJay, Senor Love Daddy. When Mookie chides a group of young men about not having jobs, they inform him that they don't need a job. It should also be noted that Mookie is shown to be a less than model employee, spending a great deal of screen time avoiding work. The viewer sees the black male as having no job and those that do have jobs, are less than diligent in their work habits.

Over time, the placement of diegetic and non-diegetic music has become a method of authenticating a film. Music is an essential tool in establishing a sense of place and tone within the world of the film. Therefore, a way to authenticate a film about the ghetto is to surround the visual images with music that has become synonymous with the community. The use of Rap music is one of the most dominant conventions of the "hood" genre. Do the Right Thing was one of the first films to use rap music to establish a tone. The song playing under the film's opening sequence is Public Enemy's "Fight the Power", whose lyrics call for people to rise up and fight against those having the power. Rap music is described by many social scholars as a site for resistance and the voice of black struggles (Rose, 1994; Dyson 1996). The film's character, Radio Raheem, refuses to turn down his radio when asked to do so in Sal's. The incident leads to a confrontation between Sal and Radio Raheem. The police are called, and while trying to subdue Radio Raheem in a choke hold, Radio Raheem is killed. Raheem's act of resistance by not turning down his music, ends up costing him his life. Reviewer Thomas Doherty (1989-90) notes, "Next to semi-automatic weaponry, the ghetto blaster is the easiest way for the underclass to exact vengeance and aggression on an unwary bourgeois"(p.35).

Do The Right Thing paints a very unflattering picture of the black male's relationships with women and children. Mookie provides no financial support for his child, in fact he puts a great deal of energy into avoiding the responsibility. His girlfriend, Tina, is constantly criticizing his role as a father. Mookie is always on the move, unless Tina is nude, then he slows down and she gets his undivided attention. Once sex is over, he is on the move again. In the world of the "hood" film, sex is the predominant means for a women to hold a black man's attention.

Do the Right Thing made black rage bankable for Hollywood filmmakers. Films following many of Lee's conventions tell stories that do more harm than good in terms of addressing the authenticity of inner city living. A great deal can be justified when characters are allowed to hide behind the guise of an uncontrollable emotion. Black males are depicted throughout these films as vessels of rage, likely to explode at any minute with deadly consequences. Films like Boys in the Hood, Menace II Society, Fresh, Jason's Lyric, and Juice, as well as others, pick up where Do The Right Thing leaves off, with African Americans as victims of violence and oppression. Boyz N The Hood, and Menace II Society are two of the more commercially successful from the "hood" genre. Both are the first major projects of young black directors; Boyz N The Hood for John Singleton, and Menace II Society for Albert and Allen Hughes. In the ghettoes of these films, hatred festers and humans act on pure emotion and impulse with little time for common sense. When these "hood" films were released, the telling of black stories by black directors was applauded for representing a realistic view of life in the inner-city. The critics gave these films the highest praise, using words like "important",

"breakthrough", "gritty", "outstanding", and "realistic" to describe them. Primarily white film critics sat in their offices and proclaimed that the "truth" was finally being told. Is the viewer to see the images of blackness captured in "hood" films to be the "truth"? When was the last time Siskel and Ebert hung out in Compton?

Boyz N the Hood

July 12, 1991 was the opening weekend for John Singleton's Boyz N the Hood. Before the weekend was over there were numerous reports of gang violence in theaters across the country. Thirty-three people were wounded, one left dead, as sold out audiences went to see a film that would take them inside the ghetto called South Central Los Angeles. John Singleton, a USC film school graduate, had made a powerful directorial debut. The violence that took place in the theaters, for some, was an extension of the subject matter deeply rooted in the film. Turan (1991) of the Los Angeles Times remarked, "What Boyz N The Hood does best is present a convincing panoply of life as it is lived in South Central Los Angles. We see the endless hanging out on street corners, the substance abuse and most of all, the frightening casual, ever-present violence of a world where college recruiters are mistaken for drive-by shooters and guns are pulled almost without a hint of provocation"(p.1). This commentary on the realistic nature of the film, was an opinion which was shared by many critics. "It is a neighborhood where young black males program their own kind, where single mothers do all of the parenting, and where black kids learn the law of the streets at an early age if they intend to make it to 21"(p.29), commented Bernard(1991) of the New York Post. Bernard also points out the universal nature of the film, which he sees as representative of any ghetto in the United States, "Although South

Central Los Angeles is a well-known urban ghetto, it will look more like a carefully pruned Levittown to boxed in New Yorkers"(p.29).

Boyz 'N' The Hood opens with some disturbing information – "One out of twenty-one Black American males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will be at the hands of another Black male". Underneath this visual image there is the dialogue and sound effects of a drive by shooting. Like the inclusion of the graffiti message in Do The Right Thing dealing with Tawana Brawley, Singleton makes the audience wonder just how much fact is going to be contained in this work of fiction. The film takes information the audience is accustom to seeing on the 6:00 news and validates it. Neither Boyz 'N' the Hood nor Do The Right Thing provide any images that challenge long held stereotypes of black males.

Singleton introduces the audiences to Tre at age eleven. Tre is in his classroom when he has a verbal confrontation with another student. The confrontation starts with an insult that escalates to verbal obscenities and finally Tre and his classmate are exchanging blows. Tre at eleven years of age cannot control his rage. This fight forces Tres' mother to send him to live with his father, Furious. It is here that we meet Tres' friends Ricky and Doughboy. Doughboy is arrested for stealing.

Most of Singleton's screenplay centers on the young adult relationship of three male friends, Ricky, Tre and Dough Boy. Both Tre and Ricky are finishing high school and are making plans for the future, which includes going to college. Ricky's brother, Doughboy is a high school drop out just out of the prison for the second time. Doughboy passes the time hanging out with friends, with no thought of a plan for his future. Like the men hanging out on

the street corner in Do the Right Thing, Doughboy is unemployed and spends most of his time either drinking, or discussing when the next opportunity to drink is going to present itself.

Boyz 'N' The Hood opening includes the title insert – "South Central 1984" – in an effort to establish a connection to realism. In the world of this film, the black family and relationships between black men and women are reflected as being in an extreme state of decay. All of the families introduced in the film are single parent households. Singleton also includes a family with a drug addict as the head of the household, whose children often have to be rescued from wandering into the streets. Females are made very prevalent in the film though males continually refer to them as "bitches and ho's. At one point when Doughboy is challenged by a woman for calling her a "ho", his reply to her is "I'm sorry, bitch", much to the delight of his friends. Doughboy's callous nature towards women is similar to the lack of respect Mookie shows Tina in *Do the Right Thing.* The comfort with which the black males in both Boyz 'N' The Hood and Do the Right Thing degrade black women is one of the more disturbing conventions of the "hood" genre.

Boyz 'N' The Hood, like Do the Right Thing, establishes a strong relationship between the world of the film and rap music. Singleton cast the well known rapper, Ice Cube, in the role of Doughboy. Through his music, Ice Cube had already created the persona of a "bad ass". His music tells stories of violent confrontations with the police and settling disputes with his AK 47. The film character of Doughboy mirrors Ice Cubes' music career persona. Doughboy carries out the actions Ice Cube raps about. When Doughboy extracts revenge on his brother's killers, he seems comfortable and without remorse gunned three people. He continues to fire even as his

victims are begging for mercy; completely unaware of his place in this vicious cycle of violence. Doughboy, in his swift revenge for the killing of his brother, never stops to think that the brothers of his victims will soon be doing the same. In fact, the last information the viewer receives regarding Doughboy is of his murder shortly after he has murdered. Introspection is a trait the black male in the "hood" film lacks; they are portrayed as conscienceless thugs, living and acting on the emotions of the moment. It could be argued that these males are forced to seek a level of street justice due largely to the absence of a trustworthy police presence. Singleton shows the police, as most films of the genre, to be corrupt and distant from those they are supposed to "serve and protect". The state of the relationship between the police and the community, though not perfect, is not a strong enough argument to justify the violence that takes place within the communities these films create.

Singleton incorporates several of the conventions Do the Right Thing birthed and adds one of his own. The prominent convention to Singleton's credit is the representation of college as an alternative to ghetto life. Ricky is murdered on the day his American College Test test scores arrive, scores that were high enough to allow him to attend the University of Southern California on an athletic scholarship. If Ricky is allowed to attend college his life will be better and so will his girlfriend's and their child's. It is a great tragedy when Ricky is cut down short of the goal. College is an oasis for young black men, a shining light in a dark world. Without college, Ricky's life has no where to go. According to the message Singleton presents through this convention, there are only two ways in which to get out of the ghetto, one is to die and the other is to go to college.

Menace to Society

In the 1993's Menace II Society, like Boyz 'N' The Hood, is set in South Central Los Angeles also. The film opens with one of the most senseless acts of violence depicted in film. The lead character, Caine, and his friend, O-Dog, go into a local store owned by Koreans to buy some beer. The shop owners are very concerned that the boys may steal something, so they watch them closely, wanting them to just pay and leave. The store owners are very frightened of the boys; and even though Caine and O-Dog are obviously under the age to buy liquor, the owners are willing to sell beer to them to avoid a confrontation. The boys become insulted over the shop owners treating them like common criminals, which in fact they are. As the boys are leaving after paying, the shop owner makes the mistake of commenting on the shame that O-Dog's behavior must bring his mother. This small statement sends O-Dog into a rage, killing the shop owner with a bullet to the head, he continues to fire into the man's dead body. He then turns his attention to the owners' wife. After forcing her to give him the store's security tape, he kills her. With the tape in hand, O-Dog steals the money in the cash register, while repetitively kicking the dead man's body and screaming obscenities at him. O-Dog keeps the tape as a souvenir of the killing, and throughout the film he invites friends over to watch it, even considering, at one point, making copies of it for sale. The viewer gets to see the image of the shop owner's brains flying out the back of his head and landing against the wall over and over again. His incessant showing of the tape reminds the viewer of just how dangerous O-Dog can be.

The film takes place over the course of one summer, a summer in which Caine and O-

Dog will be responsible for the deaths of several young black men. Through flashbacks of Caine and voice over narration, there is an attempt to try and explain Caines' behavior. The viewers are introduced to Caine at five years of age, witnessing his father kill a man over a minor insult. The young Caine explains how it was the first time he had seen his father kill a man, but it would not be the last. Caine is the product of a murdering, drug dealing father, and a heroin addicted mother. This knowledge is evidently included to illicit sympathy for Caine and his behavior. However, Caine is frustrating to watch because for all of his insightful narration, he continues making choices that lead him into a downward spiral. The Hughes brothers present a character fully aware of his actions, and still out of control in many ways. Actually, the film generates little sympathy for Caine partly because his acts of violence are so horrific.

Caine and O-Dog, like Doughboy, are black males out of control. Menace II Society is filled with black males apparently driven by a need to engage in violent behavior. Throughout the film, numerous black males are entertained by O-Dog's video tape of him murdering the shop owner. At times, the groups even play the video back in slow motion and howl with delight as the shop owner's brain matter hits the wall. Like the boys in the hood, the characters are completely unaware of the cycle of violence they perpetuate. Human life has very little value in the world of the "hood". The campaign for the film included the slogan, "This is the truth. This is what's real.". The "reality" of this film, combined with others, is becoming part of the dialogue in issues black males now find themselves trying to confront.

Menace II Society, like the other films mentioned, has strong ties to the world of Rap music, rapper MC EIHT appears as one of the film's numerous killers. Again, Rap is used to

lend an air of authenticity to the film. MC EIHT, like Ice Cube, was able to bring a ready made "bad ass" persona to the film. The film also uses the convention of going to college as a means of getting out of the ghettos. And as in Boyz 'N' The Hood, the dreams die in a hale of gun fire. Saafir, the film's only voice of reason, is killed on the day he is to leave for school in Kansas. Like Ricky, there is a sense that if Saafir could only have got away from the ghetto, he would have a productive life. The "hood" films all permeate the feeling that life is being wasted in the ghetto.

Conclusion

For over ninety years, film has supported the stereotypical portrayal of black males as violent by nature. Ever since Gus, the renegade soldier attempted to rape Little Sister in Birth of a Nation, black men have been characterized as a group to be feared and today the image is even stronger. The images portrayed in the "hood" films are thought to be less open for criticism because they are products from the hands of black directors. Many are under the assumption that black filmmakers will make films that are more honest in their depiction of black life. However, characters like Mookie, Doughboy, O-Dog, and Caine only help to further ingrain the association between the black male and acts of violence. Ghetto life can be one of violence and desperation, but since the ghetto experience is new to the screen, the images projected should be carefully evaluated. The fact that black directors are behind the cameras should not give these "hood" films an automatic blessing of authenticity. The Western, over the years, built a set of codes and conventions that were so prominent few people questioned them. The "hood" film genre is still taking shape and the images and issues it addresses are still open to debate. The debate should be

taking place now, while the genre is still relatively new.

With an absence of films dealing with the variety of black life, "hood" films have become symbolic of all black life in America. The ghetto is seen as the necessary backdrop to tell any story about black life, when in fact, many blacks live outside of America's ghettoes. The Hughes brothers commented that Menace II Society was a story about a group within a culture; they never intended for it to be applied to an entire group. Unfortunately, despite the Hughes brothers good intentions, the film has taken on the persona of being exemplary of all blacks. Films set in the "hood" constitute a very small percentage of the total number of films Hollywood releases over the course of a year. However, even though the films are few, the impact is powerful. The films, along with the images perpetually seen in rap music videos, are helping to solidify the black male as one synonymous with violence. In many cases, a rap music video is merely a short "hood" film.

The notion that the "hood" film reflects reality is the genres' most troublesome convention. For all that was written about the negative images of blacks in blaxploitation films of the seventies, these films never pretended to be anything more than entertainment. Having seen many of these films in my youth, I never for one minute felt there was anything remotely real about them, with the possible exception that police were prone to corruption. When terms like "gripping", "slice of real life", "honest", "intense" are used to describe the "hood" films, the viewer needs to be aware of what they are willing to accept as "real". Hollywood, as in the case of the Western, has manufactured the "hood" without questioning the potential dangers of the stories being told. If black males continue to be portrayed in this manner, what are the dangers?

What are the dangers to young black boys who see their life as filled with bleakness and despair? And what is the harm to these same black boys inundated with images of black men degrading black women. How do whites, who in some cases know very little about black people outside of what they see on film and television, negotiate relations with blacks? Hollywood needs to give the world a lot less Mookies, Doughboys, O-Dogs, and Caine's, and find some way to show how black males occupy all types of spaces in society, not just the ghetto. The quote by Hooks, with a slight modification, is more important now than ever before "Unless you go to work or live in the black world, across the tracks, you learn to look at black people by staring at them on the screen" (p. 290).

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